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The “Rise of China” and Chinese in the World

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Wong, Bernard and Tan Chee Beng, eds. *China's Rise and the Chinese Overseas*. London: Routledge, 2017

Zhou, Min. *Contemporary Chinese Diasporas*. New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2017.

As with other great powers in history, the rise, or return, of China to global economic and political prominence has been accompanied by human flows. The 1986 exit-entry law liberalized travel abroad. Chinese traders who took advantage of the new provisions to cross the Soviet border to sell consumer goods in the Soviet Union and Eastern Europe tied their livelihoods to the ability of Chinese industry to deliver products wanted elsewhere, becoming some of the first to bank on what we now call “China’s rise.” In the post-1990 world of more open borders, they were followed by peers who ventured to Southeast Asia, Africa, South America and elsewhere to make money in similar ways. The overseas-Chinese affairs bureaucracy termed them “*xin yimin*,” new migrants. Meanwhile, new outbound flows emerged as Chinese citizens went abroad to study, invested in real estate in other countries, accompanied China’s globalizing industries as managers, technicians and workers, and travelled around the world as tourists in ever increasing numbers. Within two decades, for a growing segment of the urban middle class, moving abroad has shifted from a money-making pursuit to a quest for a healthier environment, a more leisurely lifestyle and happier childhoods for their children. In some parts of the world, they form the first significant Chinese populations; in others, they encounter earlier established ones with different ideas of what being Chinese means.

The links between individual migrations, China’s global ambitions, and the politics of Chinese ethnicity outside China are complex. There is hardly a corner of the earth where the former two have no impact on the latter, but the extent and nature of that impact varies widely. New flows connect locations around the world in new ways. This poses a challenge to traditional approaches to studying the Chinese overseas, which focus on chronicling cultural

continuity and change within a given host society rather than on transnational processes. Furthermore, both overseas-Chinese studies and migration studies tend to exclude the more ephemeral flows of students and expatriate managers, let alone tourists, despite their impact on ethnic-Chinese economies and politics around the world.

China's Rise and the Chinese Overseas, edited by Bernard Wong and Tan Chee-Beng, aims largely to contributions address relations between a variety of newly arrived migrants (provide an updated picture of long-established ethnic Chinese populations in an era of a "rising" China. In their introduction, the editors ask how China's emergence as a global power has affected these populations. They conclude that economically, the impact has been mixed: the chapter by Ngeow Chow-Bing and Tan demonstrates this assertion on the example of Malaysia, where midsize ethnic Chinese businesses increasingly lose their niche as brokers in capital flows as large companies in China forge direct ties with the Malaysian government and parastatals. Malaysia, of course, is a rather unique case in terms of the political and socioeconomic position of the Chinese, and a comparison with how ethnic business has fared in other countries would have been interesting. Culturally, the editors argue, the impact of China's "rise" has been mostly positive because of the revival of the Chinese language even in places where it has been largely forgotten and because of the new appreciation of Chinatowns as locations of global economic vitality. Yet Ngeow and Tan's chapter cautions that the promotion of Mandarin as a prestigious foreign language does not always help the local struggles of Chinese organizations, since, as in business, they may end up marginalized in collaborations between state actors in China and foreign countries. Despite the diversification of Chinese populations around the world, the increasing dominance of mainland China-based media and cultural forms can also, as Wanning Sun, John Fitzgerald and Jia Gao show in their chapter on Australia, result in the erasure of locally specific forms of Chinese cultural expression. The editors acknowledge that China's growing global weight may be causing a "re-Sinification" among some Chinese-speaking groups, erasing more complex or formerly distinct cultural identities: this appears to be the case of the Dungan in Kazakhstan, discussed by Yelena Sadovskaya. By contrast, Bernard Wong argues that in the San Francisco Bay Area, Chinese-Americans' quest for effective participation in US politics has been strengthened by China's "rise" rather than complicated by being drawn into China's. This may be so, but Wong's chapter, which aims to paint a comprehensive picture of the evolving Chinese communities in the Bay Area rather than focusing on the tensions generated by China's emergence as a global power, may not be fine-grained enough for such a conclusion. The political activization of Chinese student

and professional associations on behalf of the Chinese government, whose efforts to cultivate them as "public diplomats" are described in Mette Thunø's chapter, complicates the picture.

Like Wong's, the chapters by Eva X. Li and Peter Li on Canada, Evelyn Hu-DeHart on Cuba, and Karen Harris on South Africa are authoritative accounts by scholars with intimate knowledge of Chinese society in the countries in question, but they devote relatively little space to the impact of China's "rise." They thus leave open the question what political, economic or demographic conditions favor the "re-Sinification" scenario versus the strengthening of local varieties of Chinese identity; homogenization versus diversity. Amy Liu's chapter on Hungary is the only one to focus on a country with no earlier history of Chinese immigration, but as it explores Hungarian attitudes to Chinese rather than the orientation of Chinese migrants themselves it is hard to compare with the others. Duan Ying's chapter on Burma is the only contribution to address explicitly tensions between an established Chinese population and new immigrants against the background of an assertive China, but it suffers from poor editing and overgeneralizations.

The quality of individual contributions notwithstanding, the volume would have benefited from a more concentrated effort to compare and theorize rather than to simply provide country studies and from a greater engagement with the growing body of scholarship on the local engagements by Chinese actors in Africa, Latin America and elsewhere coming from outside overseas Chinese studies (Monica DeHart's work on the tensions around the "relaunch" of the Chinatown in San Jose, Costa Rica, is one example).

In some ways, *Contemporary Chinese Diasporas*, edited by Min Zhou, is a complementary volume to *China's Rise and the Chinese Overseas*, as it focuses on new Chinese migration rather than on established populations. (The introduction, by Zhou and Gregor Benton, provides a brief summary of earlier migrations within Asia but warns that there is little continuity between these and new flows.) As such, the book covers a wider geographic range: along with the US (Zhou), Canada (Eva X. Li and Peter Li), Cuba (Hu-DeHart), Australia (Gao) and South Africa (Yoon Jung Park), it includes chapters on Bohemia (Adam Horálek, James Cheng, and Liyan Hu), England (Bin Wu), Spain (Li Minghuan), Ghana (Karsten Giese), Zimbabwe (Shen Xiaolei), South Korea (Changzoo Song), the Philippines (Dai Fan), Cambodia (James Chin), Singapore (Elaine Ho and Fang Yu Foo), New Zealand (Sally Liu), and Argentina and Venezuela (Weinong Gao).

All contributions deal with *xin yimin*, but some chapters chronicle the simultaneous or subsequent arrival of several distinct groups: traders, contract workers, investors, students, academics, and/or brides. Many address relations

between this variety of newly arrived migrants and established ethnic Chinese populations. Some, like the chapters on England and Japan, discuss the impact of new arrivals on the politics of Chinese ethnicity. Some also point to the interplay between new migrations and other emerging connections between China and the world. Thus, the chapter on South Korea points out that the growth of Chinese tourism can both stimulate shifts in the ethnic economy and generate a new type of lifestyle migration. The chapter on New Zealand shows that this last type of migration is often accompanied by frequent circulation between New Zealand and China, which remains migrants' source of income.

While most chapters suggest that new migrants tend to be more highly educated and wealthier than earlier cohorts, and therefore to do better in the recipient countries, the chapter on Canada attests that they, too, experience downward mobility. However, it is possible that this situation has changed since 2009, which is the most recent year included in the authors' data.

Although some of the chapters have theoretical ambitions, this volume, too, would have benefited from a more serious comparative effort. Where there is comparison, it is sometimes overhasty, such as Gao Weinong's assertion that new Chinese migrants in Latin America are "quite different" from those in developed countries and have stronger ties to China (343). I am not convinced that such a general conclusion is warranted. A more meaningful comparative approach would ask, for example, how relations between different groups (e.g. students, established *huaqiao*, new entrepreneurial migrants, state-dispatched expats) are affected by the social, economic, and political configurations that differ from country to country. For example, why did academics come to occupy a central position in Chinese associations in Japan but not elsewhere? Are class tensions arising between new and old waves of migrants more obvious in some countries than in others? Are situations converging or diverging? In some places, one type of new migration flow dominates and seems to persist surprisingly long, thanks perhaps to hometown networks, as with small-scale Chinese traders in Spain. In others, new migration waves rapidly take over earlier ones, as in South Korea, where various white-collar migrants seem to have displaced contract workers at the center of the politics of Chinese migration. What happens where is influenced by a combination of factors, and a deeper understanding requires engagement with the rapidly growing literature that examines the presence of Chinese economic and cultural institutions beyond its borders. Some of the contributors to both volumes are themselves parties to that debate, but engagement with it could have been more explicit and sustained.

In the years to come, China will be among the most important sources of *all kinds* of human movement, whether intended as temporary or permanent

and whether motivated by adventure, profit, a quest for freedom or simply pleasure — even as it also becomes a major destination of migration. This is of course — to use a mixed metaphor — a sea change in the global landscape of human mobility. But if this shift is simply a corollary of the larger shifts in the global political economy we are witnessing, then perhaps there is little that is surprising about it. As Adam McKeown in particular has shown, it is not the first time that China has occupied a central position in worldwide migration networks: in the second half of the nineteenth century, migration from China proper *both* to Southeast Asia *and* to Manchuria was on a comparable scale to trans-Atlantic migration. Is it not only natural for China to recover that position as it assumes a central place in the world-system?

The question, therefore, is whether there is anything special in *how* human flows contribute to China's new place in the world. Is there something distinctive in the way that human flows relate to the centering of China within global flows of goods, capital, and ideas? Will it make a difference if, unlike in past eras of globalization, the administrators, financiers, executors and beneficiaries of the next wave of great infrastructural projects around the world will all to a large extent come from the same country? We need more studies on this subject, including from publishers that offer better copy editing, less prohibitive prices, and, unlike Palgrave, uncensored access to their titles from inside China.